

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Salmonellosis from Reptiles

Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 305 South Street, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130

What is salmonellosis from reptiles?

All reptiles (lizards, snakes, and turtles) carry infectious bacteria (germs) called salmonella. Salmonellosis is the disease caused by this bacteria. These same bacteria are also found in uncooked foods like eggs, meat, and chicken or turkey.

What are the symptoms of salmonellosis in people?

Salmonellosis can cause an upset stomach, cramps, diarrhea, fever, nausea, and vomiting. Symptoms can take up to three days to show up, but most people get sick 12 to 36 hours after the germs are swallowed. Symptoms usually last for several days. Some people may get sick enough to go to the hospital. In rare cases, the bacteria can get into the blood and become life-threatening.

Who is at risk?

Salmonellosis can be very dangerous for infants, children, pregnant women, and the elderly. This disease is also dangerous for people who cannot fight this bacteria because they have a weakened immune system from HIV/AIDS, cancer or chemotherapy, treatment with steroids, organ transplants, kidney failure, chronic liver problems, or other diseases.

Will my pet reptile have any symptoms?

No. Salmonellosis does not usually make reptiles sick. They can have these bacteria in their bodies and not have diarrhea or any other problems; however, they can still shed (pass) the bacteria in their feces (stool).

How is salmonellosis spread?

Reptiles shed the bacteria in their feces. Since most reptiles are kept in a cage or aquarium, they are likely to have feces on their skin. They then spread the feces around the entire cage. People who touch their reptiles or clean the cages may get feces on their hands. They may then touch their hands to their face or mouths when eating, smoking, scratching, or biting their nails. Touching food may spread the feces from a person's hands to his or her mouth. If people do not wash their hands, the bacteria can get into their mouths and be swallowed. An infected person can also spread the bacteria to other people through his or her own feces. Reptiles can spread the feces on their skin onto food by crawling across kitchen counters, tables, or other places used for eating or making food.

How can salmonellosis be prevented?

- Always wash your hands carefully with soap and water after touching a reptile or cleaning its cage.
- Keep reptiles away from kitchens and food. Always wash your hands carefully before touching food.
- Never wash a reptile in a kitchen sink, bathroom sink, or bathtub.
- Prevent infants, children, the elderly, and people with weakened immune systems from touching the pet or its cage. It is also important to keep those people away from areas where the reptile has been. If you or people in your house are at risk, think about getting a different kind of pet.

Can salmonellosis be treated?

- Salmonellosis in people is usually not treated unless someone goes to the hospital. Normally, reptiles would not be treated with antibiotics. These bacteria are normal for them.

Where can I get more information?

- Salmonellosis in humans: call the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, Division of Epidemiology (617) 983-6800 or toll free at 888-658-2850 or visit the MDPH Website at www.mass.gov/dph.
- Salmonellosis in animals: call the Department of Agricultural Resources, Bureau of Animal Health (617) 727-3018.
- Your local board of health, listed in the phone book under government.
- Your doctor or health care provider.

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